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EMBODIED ART: A READING OF A. S. BYATT'S 'BODY ART'

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Abstract

This article examines the idea of an embodied art in A. S. Byatt's short story 'Body Art'. In order to contextualize this concept, the essay begins with a survey of Byatt's earlier explorations of the link between mind and body, as well as an analysis of the small amount of secondary material relating to 'Body Art', a text that has received little critical attention. The article then explores the story's ties to Dutch *vanitas* painting, a tradition that is intimately linked to the study of anatomy. The *vanitas* tradition shows how medicine and art were once a unified field, and explores the consequences of their modern division. This leads to a consideration of the influence of theological debates about mind and body and their effect, in particular, on Renaissance humanist art. The next section examines the shifting meaning of the archival collection, particularly in its significance for modern formations of subjectivity. This idea is particularly important in the context of the story's allusions to Joseph Beuys, who views the artist's body as a locus of creativity. Like Beuys, Byatt is interested in art that draws on the imaginative power of religious storytelling and imagery while rejecting its supernatural elements. Byatt draws together all of these elements in her story in order to articulate her vision of an embodied art, one that draws together the conceptual and the physical.

A. S. Byatt's short story 'Body Art', from her collection *Little Black Book of Stories* (2003), is a complex exploration of how art links together the worlds of the philosophical and the physical. Byatt's interest in fiction as a medium for examining different aspects of art is a recurring motif in her work. Vincent Van Gogh, for instance, is central not only to *Still Life* (1985), the second of the Frederica Potter sequence of novels, but also the subject of the opening and closing chapters of *Passions of the Mind* (1991). Henri Matisse is admired so profoundly that Byatt dedicates an entire book, *The Matisse Stories* (1993), to his influence. Her collection *Elementals* (1998) features Diego Velázquez in 'Christ in the House of Martha and Mary', and Bernard Lycett-Kean in 'A Lamia in the Cévennes', who is modelled on the British artist David Hockney. Byatt uses the short story, in particular, to explore specific

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aspects of the artistic process: her early story 'Racine and the Tablecloth' (1987), for instance, is partly inspired by Velázquez's *Las Hilanderas (The Spinners)*, which Byatt uses to explore weaving as a metaphor for textuality;[1] 'Art Work', the centrepiece of *The Matisse Stories*, reflects on the productive tension between the worlds of 'art' and 'work;' while 'A Lamia in the Cévennes' critiques the romantic assumption that artistic inspiration lies in the emotional (rather than the rational) side of human existence.[2] 'Body Art' extends this pattern by examining how art reveals that the worlds of ideas and materiality are inextricably connected, so that all artistic creativity, however ethereal, must ultimately take the form of an embodied art.

Mind and Body

This interlacing of mind and body is built into the typically dense symbolism that Byatt employs throughout the text. The story mainly takes place, for instance, in the obstetrics ward of a fictional London hospital, St. Pantaleon's, with this location of birth (and death) given a further layer of significance by the decision to set the story's opening in the lead-up to Christmas. The hospital's basement holds the legacy of Sir Eli Pettifer, a Victorian surgeon whose daughter Molly 'had been one of the first generation of qualified women doctors', and who bequeathed to the hospital his 'huge Collection, mostly of medical instruments and curiosities', together with some valuable works of art.[3] The main male character in 'Body Art', Damian Becket, is both an obstetrician and a dilettante who manages the hospital's art collection. His life is changed in the course of the story by his encounters with two women. The first, Daisy Whimple, is an impoverished art student who visits the hospital to decorate the ward for the Christmas holidays. Daisy's philosophy of art reflects her ambivalent relationship with her own body. Inspired by the avant-garde German artist Joseph Beuys, she regards the artist's body as a locus of creativity, while also suffering from an eating disorder and the after-effects of a traumatic abortion that has made it nearly impossible for her to conceive a child. Daisy expresses this mixture of creation and destruction by stealing materials from the Pettifer collection in order to create a sculpture of the Hindu goddess Kali. The second woman to enter Damian's life is Martha Sharpin, an expert in seventeenth-century Dutch *vanitas* painting who is hired to catalogue the hospital's collection, and with whom Damian begins a tentative relationship.

[1] See Peter D. Mathews, 'Unraveling A. S. Byatt's "Racine and the Tablecloth"', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 11.2 (2017), pp. 221–38.

[2] See Peter D. Mathews, 'Dynamic Tensions in A. S. Byatt's "A Lamia in the Cévennes"', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 59.2 (2018), pp. 213–22.

[3] A. S. Byatt, *Little Black Book of Stories* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), p. 55. All further references are to this edition.

Damian takes pity on Daisy's wretched circumstances, hiring her to assist Martha and inviting her to sleep at his apartment. This decision leads to a brief sexual encounter that results, miraculously, in Daisy becoming pregnant. Despite her initial horror at her condition, the story ends with Daisy joyously giving birth to a baby, Kate, which according to her Beuysian philosophy constitutes a kind of 'body art'. Byatt thus gives her three main characters in 'Body Art' one foot each in the worlds of art and the body, uniting them thematically in the final scene of Kate's birth.

Although 'Body Art' is the story in Byatt's oeuvre that examines most directly the notion of an embodied art, this piece should also be understood in the larger context of her fiction. The interaction between the materiality of the body and the classifying system of language is a major theme in *The Biographer's Tale* (2000), for instance. At the beginning of that novel, Byatt describes a literary theory class in which the professor alludes to the pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles, whose meditations on the origins of human physiology involve random assemblages of body parts that have yet to discover their proper arrangement. The class's professor, the aptly-named Gareth Butcher, brings up Empedocles in reference to 'Lacan's theory of *morcellement*, the dismemberment of the imagined body'.[4] Butcher has in mind Lacan's influential essay 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function the *I*' (1949) in which Lacan observes how human infants, at a certain stage in their development, (mis)recognize themselves in the mirror. The mirror provides the infant with an ego-ideal, an imaginary unity that is at odds with the fragmented physical experience the child has had of their body to that point: hence, the '*morcellement*' to which Lacan refers is an imagined disintegration that sits uncomfortably with the ideal of unification the child glimpses in the mirror. When the novel's protagonist, a graduate student named Phineas G. Nanson, tries to construct an image of the biographer Scholes Destry-Scholes by studying the latter's collections of notes and objects, this process similarly leads Nanson to a false picture, a misrecognition. The collections of Scholes Destry-Scholes may function as 'mirrors of his personality', but without the artistic function of the imaginary to connect and organize them these contents are meaningless, dead facts.[5] That is why Nanson learns in the novel to see such collections and archives as inseparable from the everyday life that created them, so that they gradually shift in his mind 'from inanimate to living collections'.[6]

[4] A. S. Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), p. 3.

[5] Carmen Lara-Rallo, 'Museums, Collections and Cabinets: "Shelf after Shelf after Shelf"' in *The Exhibit in the Text: The Museological Practices of Literature*, ed. by Caroline Patey and Laura Scuriatti (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), 219–39 (p. 226).

[6] Jane Campbell, *A.S. Byatt and the Heliotropic Imagination* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2004), p. 223.

This lesson finds a new iteration not only in 'Body Art', in which Daisy's artistic masterpiece shifts from her grimly brilliant sculpture of Kali to the living, breathing figure of her daughter Kate, but also constitutes the typical experience of Byatt's other artistic characters. In 'Art Work', for instance, the story's professional artist, Robin, sets himself an aesthetic and intellectual challenge in the repetitive 'modern *vanitas*es' he paints, a process that, despite its intricacy and beauty, is cut off from actual lived experience.[7] Even though Robin works from home, he self-consciously maintains his distance from the domestic sphere of his wife, Debbie, and their cleaner, Mrs. Brown, a space he associates with the lesser worlds of work and femininity. Robin's smug superiority is shattered when he unexpectedly encounters Mrs. Brown's sculpture, created from a collage of household items from his family's everyday life, the title of which, 'WORK IN SEVERAL MATERIALS: 1975-1990', subversively blurs the lines between artistic and domestic 'work'.[8] This resounding blow to his creative ego is only softened at the end of the story when Robin, like Daisy in 'Body Art', creates a sculpture of Kali that, despite being 'a simplified travesty of Sheba Brown', nonetheless seems to reveal a new potential in his work.[9]

The character of Daisy Whimple also has an obvious precursor in the figure of Peggi Nollett from 'The Chinese Lobster', the final entry in *The Matisse Stories*. Both characters are young, female art students who are struggling to succeed in their chosen field. Both women have body image problems, manifested in Peggi's case by the '*depressing colour*' of her clothing and the suicidal thoughts that see her visiting the 'doctor at the Health Centre', while in 'Body Art' Daisy faints from not eating enough and regards the idea of being pregnant as similar to having a hostile organism growing in her.[10] Daisy, however, appears to possess genuine creative talent, whereas Peggi's paranoid response to the 'misogyny' of Matisse consists of smearing reproductions of his work with her bodily waste. Her academic advisor, Perry Diss, describes Peggi's work to his supervisor, Gerda Himmelblau:

> The work is *horrible*, Dr. Himmelblau. It disgusts. It desecrates. Her studio – in which the poor creature also eats and sleeps – is papered with posters of Matisse's work. . . . And they have all been smeared and defaced. With what looks like *organic matter* – blood, Dr. Himmelblau, beef stew or faeces. . . . Some of the daubings are deliberate reworkings of bodies or faces – changes of

[7] A. S. Byatt, *The Matisse Stories* (New York: Vintage, 1996), p. 69.
[8] Ibid., p. 78.
[9] Ibid., p. 86.
[10] Ibid., pp. 99–100, original italics.

> outlines – some are like thrown tomatoes – probably *are* thrown tomatoes – and eggs, yes – and some are *great swastikas of shit*.[11]

Peggi's visceral rejection of Matisse is psychologically revealing but artistically void, a physical reaction that borrows its materials from objects typically deployed by an ignorant mob: faeces, eggs, rotten tomatoes. Peggi's negative acts of mindless destruction contrast sharply with Daisy's disturbing but thought-provoking sculpture of Kali, the Hindu goddess of creation *and* destruction which, despite being hurriedly removed from the exhibition due to its stolen content, is affirmed by Martha's expert eye as a 'good' piece of work (p. 90).

The precedent of greatest relevance to 'Body Art' in Byatt's oeuvre, though, is undoubtedly in the short story 'Christ in the House of Martha and Mary' from the collection *Elementals*. Inspired by Velázquez's 1618 painting of the same name – a work that Byatt singled out as her favourite piece of art in a 1993 article for *National Gallery News* – she revisits, in a seventeenth-century context, the episode of Martha and Mary related in Luke 10:38–42. Whereas the biblical story emphasizes the split between contemplation (Mary) and domestic service (Martha), Byatt's story instead has a young artist – Celia Wallhead cannily points out that although '"the young artist" is identifiable as Velázquez, he is at one and the same time both him and *not* him' – discussing with two servants, Dolores and Concepción, the ability of art to change the way we see the world and our place in it.[12] The painter argues, for instance, that Dolores's superb cooking should be regarded as an art equal in stature to his painting. The story, in this way, insists on the *materiality* of true art, with Byatt emphasizing the common source of inspiration between the food that Delores prepares and the kitchen ingredients that the young painter uses as the models for his painting. Like in 'Racine and the Tablecloth' and 'Art Work', this parallel collapses the separation of the creative world from that of lived experience, a distinction that is epitomized in the biblical story by the difference between Mary and Martha. 'The Church teaches that Mary is the contemplative life, which is higher than Martha's way, which is the active way', notes the young painter. 'But any painter must question, which is which? And a cook also contemplates mysteries'.[13] Byatt thus simultaneously foregrounds the materiality of Velázquez's painting – 'This was living flesh', observes Concepción when she sees the artist's depiction of her – and connects it to Delores's cooking: the physicality, the artistry

[11] Ibid., p. 106, original italics.
[12] Celia Wallhead, *A. S. Byatt: Essays on the Short Fiction* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 160.
[13] A. S. Byatt, *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice* (New York: Vintage, 1999), pp. 226–27.

of both disciplines reveal them as two kinds of body art.[14] This story also provides a crucial precedent for the resurfacing of the name Martha in 'Body Art', a character through which Byatt reaffirms the unification of the creative and intellectual (her expertise in art history) with the physical and domestic (her involvement in the birth of Daisy's baby).

Despite these thematic connections to Byatt's earlier work, 'Body Art' has received surprisingly little attention from critics. Elizabeth Hicks, for example, uses a brief discussion of this story to introduce her analysis of *The Children's Book* (2008). Hicks points out, in particular, how Byatt's extensive description of the objects in the hospital's archive reveals her fascination with materiality. 'Byatt endows material objects in her writing', she observes, 'with both cultural and symbolic meaning'.[15] Carmen Lara-Rallo similarly uses her short discussion of 'Body Art' to introduce her larger examination of the motif of museums and collections in Byatt's fiction. Both Hicks and Lara-Rallo thus only treat 'Body Art' obliquely, as the appetizer for their analysis of other works by Byatt rather than examining the story on its own terms. As such, 'Body Art' may be said to have been neglected by Byatt's critics – Mariadele Boccardi devotes less than a paragraph to this story in *A. S. Byatt* (2013), while it is entirely absent from both Wallhead's *A.S. Byatt: Essays on the Short Fiction* (2007) and Hicks's *The Still Life in the Fiction of A. S. Byatt* (2010), a puzzling omission given that the latter work contains an extensive discussion of the *vanitas* in Byatt's writing.

The only other critical examination of 'Body Art' is an article by Émilie Walezak, but her text also focuses on this story sporadically, moving back and forth as it does between the various pieces in the *Little Black Book of Stories* to highlight how Byatt uses the symbolism of colour. Walezak thus similarly deals with this story in an oblique way, so that even the section of her essay titled 'Body Art' only treats this story in its final paragraph. 'Byatt's work in the tales is about transforming body parts or the body's deficiencies into artwork', she contends.[16] While this statement is arguably true of many of the stories in the collection, it hardly does justice to the numerous subtleties that Byatt is exploring in the pages of 'Body Art'. Still more problematic is the way that Walezak links the body with the religious terms 'transubstantiation' and 'transfiguration', which ultimately leads to her conclusion that 'the body has become the thing which exceeds representation, combining the sublime with the abject' in order to create 'a postmodern form of the

[14] Ibid., p. 229.

[15] Elizabeth Hicks, 'Public and Private Collections in A. S. Byatt's *The Children's Book*', *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 44.2 (June 2011), 171–85 (p. 172).

[16] Émilie Walezak, 'Black Magic in A. S. Byatt's *Little Black Book of Stories*: Painting the Body Sublime', *Polysèmes*, 14 (2015), 1–11 (p. 6).

sublime'.[17] My view is that Walezak's move away from the physicality of art and the body into the realm of the sublime contradicts the materialist core of what Byatt is trying to express, for 'Body Art' is a story in which she insists, against all idealism and spirituality, on a shared materiality of art and the body that makes possible an embodied form of art.

Art and anatomy

Byatt presents this theme of embodiment in 'Body Art' by restaging a historical shift that has occurred in the meaning of the archive or museum, one that has had crucial consequences for the practice of art. As Lara-Rallo points out, 'Body Art' did not actually make its first public appearance in *Little Black Book of Stories*, having been published a few months earlier in a collection titled *The Phantom Museum and Henry Wellcome's Collection of Medical Curiosities* (2003). The occasion for this book was an exhibition at the British Museum of a number of medical curiosities from Wellcome's collection, an event that coincided with both his 150th birthday and the 250th anniversary of the British Museum. Byatt transparently draws a number of plot details from this context, most obviously the transformation of Sir Henry Wellcome into the fictional Sir Eli Pettifer. Byatt adds other realistic touches to the story – the extensive and gruesome description of 'a Dutch painting of an anatomy lesson being performed on a stillborn infant', for instance, is clearly taken from Jan van Neck's 1683 picture *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Frederik Ruysch* (p. 56). Van Neck's painting is doubly significant, for it not only emphasizes the visceral, non-transcendent aspect of human physicality that Byatt explores in her story, but also because of its evocation of the historical figure of Frederik Ruysch (1638–1731), a pioneer in preserving and displaying human anatomical specimens.

Using techniques such as drying and embalming, Ruysch created an extensive private collection in his Amsterdam home that drew the rich and powerful from all over the world. In a 1999 review in *Nature* of an exhibition of Ruysch's collection, much of which is now housed in the Kunstkammer of the National Academy of Sciences in St Petersburg, having been purchased by Tsar Peter the Great in 1717, Martin Kemp notes how Ruysch intertwines anatomical science with art in the presentation of his preserved body parts:

> One lost exhibit, illustrated in a folding plate in Ruysch's *Thesaurus Anatomicus* of 1717, took the form of a small mountain scattered with gall, kidney and bladder stones on which flourishes a forest of injected vessels. The elaborate

[17] Ibid., pp. 6–7.

> tableau is completed with three grieving infants' skeletons, creating a miniature 'theatre' on the theme of the transience of life. The 'trees' of vessels and bodily rocks stress the microcosmic conception of the human body as a 'lesser world'.[18]

Ruysch's collection is notably different to the neutral objectivity of a modern anatomical textbook, insofar as his specimens do not merely convey information in a detached manner about the human body. Ruysch's presentations of human anatomy are designed as science *and* art, as aesthetic and theatrical spectacles that are supposed to inspire and engage the viewer while teaching them about the intricacies of the human body: they are, quite literally, body art.

An illuminating article by Julie V. Hansen titled 'Resurrecting Death: Anatomical Art in the Cabinet of Dr. Frederik Ruysch' (1996) explores this overlap between anatomy and art in the context of Dutch *vanitas* painting, the area of specialty of Martha Sharpin, the art expert in 'Body Art'. Hansen shows how the domain of anatomy was constructed as an aesthetic space, with the area in which it is practiced referred to as a 'theater' that hosted lectures and debates, vivisections and dissections.[19] Furthermore, Hansen relates, the 'anatomical theater ... was lit by scented candles to augment the dim light drawn from windows and sometimes featured music played by a flutist', practices that enhanced the sense that the audience was witnessing an artistic performance.[20] Hansen thus demonstrates how art and anatomy mutually framed each other through the aesthetic of the *vanitas*:

> Like the *vanitas* painting, the *vanitas* anatomical specimen functioned as a visual reminder of the fruits of sin. By arranging the skeletons in moralistic tableaux ... the university curators gave the setting of the dissecting theater a more complex meaning. The anatomical collection set up a visual dialogue between the living viewer and the past and future to which the criminal body must come.[21]

It is hardly surprising, then, that this shared stylistic vision inspired some of the most famous paintings in this genre – not only the van Neck painting, but also its predecessor, Adriaen Backer's *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Frederik*

[18] Martin Kemp, 'Babes in Bottles: The Anatomical Art of Frederik Ruysch', *Nature*, 399 (6 May 1999), 34 (p. 34).

[19] Julie V. Hansen, 'Resurrecting Death: Anatomical Art in the Cabinet of Dr. Frederik Ruysch', *The Art Bulletin*, 78.4 (December 1996), 663–79 (p. 667).

[20] Ibid., p. 667.

[21] Ibid., p. 669.

Ruysch (1670) and, most famously, Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaas Tulp* (1632).

The character of Damian Becket in 'Body Art' is thus an echo of this historical overlap between the medical and artistic worlds of art and anatomy, a duality that is echoed in his name: Damian is an allusion to the third-century doctor Saint Damian who, together with his twin brother Cosmas, was known for his generosity in healing the sick, while Becket refers to Thomas Becket, the twelfth-century Archbishop of Canterbury, the combination of these two names signalling a symbolic unification of humanity's physical and spiritual care. Comparing Damian's figure with that of Ruysch, however, reveals a crucial shift in the relationship between life and art that reflects what Giorgio Agamben, in *The Man without Content* (1970), refers to as the 'museumification' of art, which divides the latter from the realm of everyday life. For whereas Damian is primarily a doctor who happens to have an interest in art, Ruysch's work as an anatomist makes no separation between these two spheres. Hansen writes:

> Under Ruysch's careful ministrations, anatomical art surpassed mere craftsmanship. Throughout the catalogue of his collection, he is consistently described as a *Konstenaar* (an artist) rather than a *Balsemenaar* (an embalmer), and his assemblages are referred to as *Konstwerken* (artworks). His skill in making tiny blood vessels, veins, and tissues approximate the flush of life was as magical as the skill required for the finest needlework.... Ruysch's talents revealed and rivaled God's own superhuman handiwork.... The uncorrupted condition of youthful bodies lent itself to the melancholic *vanitas* themes he favored.[22]

Ruysch's careful staging of his specimens is also artful in the other sense of the word, for 'the strategic placement of the clothing served a more important function than embellishment – it hid all the discernible traces of dismembership and embalming'.[23] The lack of separation between art and anatomy in Ruysch's time reflects a harmony between science and religion that no longer exists. The moral vision of the *vanitas* is underpinned by the implication that its art reveals, on the one hand, the grandeur of God's creation, and the sinfulness of fallen humanity on the other. Yet this dual mission can only be preserved by the deceptive fictions of art, as evidenced both by the stylistic manipulations of Ruysch's specimens and the unrealistic freshness of the dead specimens in the paintings of van Neck and Backer. Only the wonders of nature, those which glorify God, may be shown in these

[22] Ibid., p. 674.
[23] Ibid.

depictions, while the equally natural processes of decay and rigor mortis are removed from sight.

The contrast between the outward beauty of the human form – modelled, according to Genesis 1:27, on that of the divine Creator himself – and the specimen's inner corruption is a juxtaposition that was meant, in the discourse of Dutch Reformed Protestantism, to emphasize the fallen nature of humanity. The ability to carry out such anatomical investigations nonetheless rested implicitly on this kind of moralistic judgment, in an age when the general population possessed a deep horror of the practice of dissection. Anatomical analysis of a human being, which constituted the culmination of Amsterdam's Christmas programme, was not performed on just any physical specimen. The corpse was inevitably that of a criminal whose misdeeds were serious enough to warrant capital punishment, with dissection seen as a further act of humiliation to which no normal citizen would consent to undergo. In Great Britain, the taboo against dissection, even for the noble quest of anatomical knowledge, likewise held a strong cultural sway over the population: only criminals sentenced to death could be dissected by doctors and scientists, a custom that resulted in a severely restricted number of available specimens. Ruth Richardson's study *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute* (1987) traces the history of this struggle between science and culture in Britain, noting how the gibbet once served as a similar symbolic 'punishment' for society's worst offenders. In 1752, the Parliament changed this practice in favour of dissection, which was considered an even harsher form of retribution. Richardson explains:

> Hanging in chains was consciously designed as a grim fate. The corpse of the victim was treated with tar, enclosed in an iron framework, and suspended from a gibbet – either at the scene of the crime, or at some prominent site in the vicinity. The body would of course decay over time; birds would tear the flesh, pieces would fall to the ground. The gibbet with its creaking human-scarecrow corpse occupied an important place in popular imaginative apprehension of 'justice' and judicial retribution. As an exemplary punishment it was exceeded in power only by dissection. The intention of both punishments was to deny the wrongdoer a grave.[24]

Like the visceral opening scenes in Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975), both the gibbet and dissection were theatrical public performances of punishment, the primary effectiveness of which lay not in preventing crime, but in conveying the rhetoric of distributive justice. The 'suffering' of the

[24] Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute*. 2nd edn (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 35–36.

dead criminal trapped in the gibbet, or the dissected corpse whose identity was torn apart along with the physical body, were thus also a grim kind of body art.

Spirit and flesh

The different aesthetics at work in the carefully orchestrated anatomy lessons of the Dutch anatomists and *vanitas* painters, which present a moralistic, carefully edited, and darkly beautiful side of the medical practice, compared to the gruesome images of the gibbet and the desecrated body of the dissected human, nonetheless emerge from the same contemporary theological debates regarding the status of the body. Indeed, according to Richardson, the fear of dissection was a mixture of pagan folk superstitions and a belief that dismemberment would make the heavenly resurrection of the body impossible.

> It was popularly understood that the surgeons' official function and interest in a murderer's corpse was not to revive, but rather to destroy it. Dissection was a very *final* process. It denied hope of survival – even the survival of identity after death. . . . Dissection represented a gross assault upon the integrity and identity of the body *and* upon the repose of the soul, each of which – in other circumstances – would have been carefully fostered. Whatever the theological position on the spiritual status of the buried corpse, Christian sentiment endorsed the need for permitting the natural decay of the integral body, and for its protection during the process.[25]

The importance of Damien Becket's lapsed Catholicism to Byatt's examination of human physicality in this story becomes clearer in this religious context, for since the time of St. Paul, Christianity has had a long history of favouring spiritual 'purity' over the sinfulness of the flesh.

Byatt references three theological debates about the body in the course of 'Body Art', two of which focus on the story's motif of babies and birth. The first comes from the initial setting of the narrative at Christmas, a coincidence that Byatt selects in order to recall the reader's attention to the Christological debates over the Doctrine of Incarnation. The incarnation of Christ, as the Gospel of John famously puts it, is when 'the Word was made flesh' (John 1:14), an advent that is gently parodied at the beginning of Byatt's story by the 'customary banter in the Gynae Ward . . . about the race to bear the Christmas Day baby' (p. 47). With pointed irony, Byatt strays from the traditional Christmas narrative by noting the arrival of 'black twins, huge, healthy, and slow to deliver', so that the Christmas baby (or rather, babies) conforms in neither number nor ethnicity to the more familiar tale in the

[25] Ibid., p. 76, original italics.

Bible (p. 66). Byatt returns to the question of incarnation and the Christmas narrative at the very end of the story with the birth of little Kate, a reprise to which I shall likewise return at the end of this paper.

The second theological issue concerning the body to which Byatt refers in 'Body Art', one that bears more pressingly on the question of Damian's lapsed Catholicism, is whether infants are covered by God's salvation. The doctrine of original sin throws up some difficult questions about the spiritual status of infants who die before they are old enough to repent, such as those who perish in childbirth. In the *Confessions*, Augustine famously remembers his own bad behaviour as an infant as an argument against childish innocence, but it is in *The City of God* that he outlines most clearly his theological reasoning:

> Therefore if even infants, as the true faith holds, are born sinners, not on their own account, but in virtue of their origin (and hence we acknowledge the necessity for them of the grace of remission of sins), then it follows that just as they are sinners, they are recognized as breakers of the Law which was given in paradise. . . . Thus the process of birth rightly brings perdition on the infant because of the original sin by which God's covenant was first broken[.][26]

Augustine returns to this question of infant salvation later in the book, when he considers whether those babies who died in the womb, such as stillborns or abortions, will go to heaven, stating that he is unsure of their position: 'I cannot bring myself either to affirm or deny that they will share in the resurrection'.[27] Augustine's arguments about original sin not only influenced the Calvinist doctrines that underpin the Dutch Reformed Church, but also helped form the Catholic doctrine that such infants are stuck forever in limbo, as Martha reminds Damian in Byatt's story:

> He had a horror, he said, of the musty world of relics and bits of skin and bone which ought no longer to have meaning if their ex-inhabitants were in heaven. Martha Sharpin said he was forgetting the resurrection of the body, for one thing. And for another, the stillborn were not in heaven but in limbo, forever unbaptised. (p. 68)

These doctrinal strands converge in 'Body Art', setting up a juxtaposition between Ruysch's specimens of dead infants, caught in the artistic limbo of their glass jars or on the surface of van Neck's painting, a simultaneous testimony to the wonder of God's creation and the corruption of original sin that

[26] Augustine, *City of God*, trans. by Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), pp. 688–89.

[27] Ibid., p. 1054.

lies concealed beneath, and the more confronting question, for Byatt, of how this dogmatic art measures up to the actual human experience of life.

This tension between life and art arises from the third of the spirit/flesh debates in 'Body Art', an artistic revisiting of the question of Christ's divinity in the form of Renaissance humanism. There is a stylistic shift from the medieval depictions of Jesus, for instance, to the emerging style pioneered by artists like Giotto, which is marked by the growing importance of perspective and realism. Like the Dutch anatomy painters, this verisimilitude was inspired not by a neutral desire to depict truth, but by the moral vision of Renaissance humanism. Humanist art takes the uniquely divine figure of Christ and turns him into the exemplar of a new, universal human ideal. The subversion implicit in this move is poignantly captured in Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot* (1868), in the famous scene where Rogozhin and Prince Myshkin stand together before a copy of Hans Holbein's painting *Christ in the Tomb* (1521). After Rogozhin confesses his admiration for Holbein's piece, Myshkin responds: 'That picture! A man could lose his faith looking at that picture!'[28] Indeed, later in the novel the minor character Terentyev delivers an important speech about the painting, claiming that the realism of Christ's corpse actively discourages the viewer from believing in the possibility of his resurrection: '[I]f a corpse like that . . . was seen by all his disciples . . . by all in fact who believed in and worshipped him, how could they have believed, looking at such a corpse, that the martyr would rise again?'[29] Humanist art, with its implicit challenge to both the divinity of Christ and the notion of original sin, thus opens the door, as Dostoevsky's novel explores, to the more radical forces of atheism and disbelief.

These historical struggles provide a crucial context for understanding the character of Damian, who repeatedly finds himself torn between the dogmatism of the religious world in which he was raised and his peculiar inability to believe in those teachings. The reader is told that Damian was designated from birth by his 'Northern Irish mother' as 'her gift to God', whereas his father wants him to pursue a career as 'a true scholar, a linguist who spoke many tongues, a civilised man' (p. 59). The attempt to please both parents leaves Damian's life in a figurative limbo that is replicated, in turn, by his marriage to Eleanor, their eventual separation leaving him able neither to continue the relationship nor to initiate a divorce. Byatt nonetheless emphasizes that Damian does not abandon religion as a result of his mother or wife, but from an experience very much like that described by Dostoevsky:

[28] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. by Alan Myers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 229.

[29] Ibid., p. 430.

> He lost his faith as a result of a vision. . . . It was a vision of Christ on the cross – not a heavenly appearance, but the result of an unnaturally close inspection of the carving that hung in his local church, a painted wooden carving, neither good nor bad, a mediocre *run-of-the-mill* carving of a human body. . . . He thought, I belong to a religion which worships the form of a dead or dying man. . . . He went on looking at the figure hanging by his hands, with outrage and then with pity. There was a man, who had been dying, and then dead. . . . A man is his body, his body is a man. (pp. 62-64; original italics)

Damian's ineluctable slide toward a kind of secular materiality, coupled with his apparent guilt over his sister-in-law's death from an illegal abortion, cause him 'to concern himself with bodies', a philosophical change that results in him entering medical school and training to become an obstetrician (p. 61).

The museum and the human cabinet

There is, however, another crucial metaphor that emerges from Damian's visionary experience, and that is the image of a 'man-sized ice-box' (p. 63). Damian's experience of this 'ice-box' bears a striking resemblance to the burden of sin that Christian, in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), bears on his back, especially as it is portrayed in William Blake's painting *Christian Reading in His Book* (1824-27).

> He felt for the shape of his time – his whole life – when he would have said he believed, and was aghast to sense it like a great humming ice-box behind him, in which what he had been had kept its form, neither dead nor alive, suspended. He was a human bowed down under the weight of a man-sized ice-box. (pp. 62-63)

In the 'man-sized ice-box', Byatt melds together Bunyan's religious symbolism with John Locke's famous metaphor, in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), of the newly-born human being as an 'empty cabinet' ready to be filled with the experiences that will shape and mould its character.[30] This seemingly quotidian observation was revolutionary in the context of the society in which Locke was writing, for it challenged not only the political assumptions of the ruling aristocracy, but also the religious doctrine of original sin.

Such a reading of Damian's ice-box/cabinet gains support in the story from Byatt's references to Joseph Beuys, who is cited by Daisy as her primary

[30] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Volume One*, ed. by Alexander Campbell Fraser (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1959), p. 48.

artistic inspiration. 'He was the greatest', she tells Damian. 'He changed everything' (p. 58). A few pages later, Damian, knowing little about Beuys's work, asks Martha for an explanation of its significance. She tells him that Beuys 'was a great artist who dealt in dark things made of common materials', most famously fat and felt, '[u]sually on a large scale' (p. 77). Martha emphasizes that the logic of Beuys's work is grounded in a contradiction: the creation of 'relics' or 'reliquaries', terms that have a rich religious meaning, but 'of no religion' (p. 77).

> He's probably the greatest single influence on art students today. They do *personal versions* – you know, the fish slice that my girlfriend didn't clean, the knickers I wore when I first kissed Joe Bloggs – the disk collection I pinched from my ex-lover – the purely personal. I am an artist so my relics *are art*. I'm not saying that's your student's line. She may really understand Beuys. (p. 77 original italics)

Beuys's philosophy of art is a logical descendant of Locke's epistemology, in which the body of the artist is imagined as a creative 'cabinet' in which art – body art – can be produced and extracted.

As a young man, Beuys planned to study medicine, an interest that instead evolved into an 'artistic examination of man as a "sick animal"' in the spiritual sense.[31] Beuys sought to cure this condition through the practice of 'social sculpture' and the radical notion that everything in the world is, in a sense, a creative act. Beuys's ongoing interest in medicine is particularly important to his artistic project, observes his biographer Claudia Mesch, for he 'made continual reference to the therapeutic aims of both Western and traditional medicine in his multiples, vitrines, objects and installations'.[32] In 'Medicine Through the Artist's Eyes' (2004), for instance, Y. Michael Barilan reflects on Beuys's vitrine *Untitled (1974-79)*:

> The installation ... looks like another cabinet of Dr. Caligari. A collection of objects in pairs is meticulously arranged in a glass box, which could be a glass case in a museum or a reliquary. Probably, the objects appear in pairs in order to enhance the aura of magic and ambiguity.... Do the bottles contain medicines or poison? Is the context scientific, therapeutic, or imbued with Frankensteinian narcissism? ... No answers are forthcoming.[33]

[31] C. Ottoman and others, 'Joseph Beuys: Trauma and Catharsis', *Medical Humanities*, 36 (2010), 93–96 (p. 93).

[32] Claudia Mesch, *Joseph Beuys* (London: Reaktion Books, 2017), p. 75.

[33] Y. Michael Barilan, 'Medicine Through the Artist's Eyes: Before, During, and After the Holocaust', *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 47.1 (Winter 2004), 110–34 (p. 120).

Beuys's artistic vision presents us with collections and archives that are 'resistant to organization, coherence or real understanding', devoid of any divine arrangement.[34] In her explanation of Beuys, Martha stresses to Damian that aspiring art students often misunderstand Beuys's philosophy of art as an excuse for indulging their narcissism, whereas in her opinion it constitutes a complex strategy that denies the supernatural aspects of religion while acknowledging the imaginative power of its images and narratives. Beuys's art, in other words, represents an atheistic version of the Dutch *vanitas* tradition, using found materials to emphasize the materiality of a human existence that is inseparable from its natural context.

In 'Body Art', the Lockean metaphor of the modern human subject as a 'cabinet' replete with experiences is drawn into an implicit comparison with the phenomenon of the collection, archive, or museum that repeatedly appears in Byatt's fiction. As I noted earlier, the inspiration for this story came from Byatt's encounter with the collection of Sir Henry Wellcome, 'a passionate collector who created one of the world's greatest museums about the history of medicine, a prodigiously diverse assortment of all kinds of instruments and specimens connected with man's physical and spiritual well-being'.[35] What Byatt turns into the Sir Eli Pettifer collection in 'Body Art' is then connected, via the reference to Jan van Neck, to the seventeenth-century collection of Frederik Ruysch. Despite their apparent similarities, there are crucial political and religious differences that separate the collections of Pettifer and Ruych. As Agamben explains in *The Man Without Content*, the historical evolution of collecting curiosities stretches back to the medieval period:

> Toward the end of the Middle Ages, in the countries of continental Europe, princes and learned men used to collect the most disparate object in a *Wunderkammer* (cabinet of wonder), which contained, promiscuously, rocks of an unusual shape, coins, stuffed animals, manuscript volumes, ostrich eggs, and unicorn horns. Statues and paintings stood side by side with curios and exemplars of natural history in these cabinets of wonders when people started collecting art objects[.][36]

Despite the apparent heterogeneity of its contents, the 'cabinet of wonders' was thought to contain an inherent order because it is a microcosm of God's divine creation.

[34] Mesch, p. 76.
[35] Lara-Rallo, p. 219.
[36] Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, trans. by Georgia Albert (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 29.

> Only seemingly does chaos reign in the *Wunderkammer*, however: to the mind of the medieval scholar, it was a sort of microcosm that reproduced, in its harmonious confusion, the animal, vegetable, and mineral macrocosm. This is why the individual objects seem to find their meaning only side by side with others, between the walls of a room in which the scholar could measure at every moment the boundaries of the universe.[37]

In Byatt's fiction the reader does sometimes encounter surviving remnants of this earlier mindset, but only as an anachronism – in *The Game* (1967), for instance, Cassandra is fascinated by the medieval period because she sees it as 'a network of symbols which made the outer world into a dazzling but comprehensible constellation of physical facts whose spiritual interrelations could be grasped and woven by the untiring intellect', while in *Angels and Insects* (1992) the deeply religious Harald Alabaster has amassed a disparate collection of objects in a pious attempt to refute the theories of Charles Darwin by proving that they have an immanent divine connection.[38]

In the post-Lockean world of Byatt's stories, however, the collection has largely shifted in significance, so that its contents no longer express a divine will in creation, but rather the personality and taste of the collector. The external 'cabinet of wonder' has come to mirror the internal 'cabinet of experience' that constitutes the modern subject. In her book *How Novels Think* (2005), Nancy Armstrong argues that Locke's idea has caused a revolution in subjectivity that gave rise not only to a new concept of the self, but also made possible the genre of the novel, the form of literature best suited to describing (and producing) this new kind of mindset.

> [T]he history of the novel and the history of the modern subject are, quite literally, one and the same. The British novel provides the test case. . . . John Locke thought of the human mind as a 'cabinet' or 'storehouse' emptied of all innate qualities and waiting to be furnished with information from the world. . . . Much as the mind, in Locke's theory, acquired information through sensations of the world and then converted those sensations into ideas against which it measured subsequent sensations, so the body, in the fiction of Daniel Defoe and other eighteenth-century novelists, acquired social experience and converted those encounters with the world at large into self-restraint and good manners.[39]

Deploying this logic, the novel develops along the same lines as a literary 'cabinet of wonders', detailing in its pages the extraordinary adventures and

[37] Ibid., p. 30.

[38] A. S. Byatt, *The Game* (New York: Vintage, 1992), p. 20.

[39] Nancy Armstrong, *How Novels Think: The Limits of Individualism from 1719–1900*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 3–4.

sensations 'collected' by early protagonists such as Robinson Crusoe or Moll Flanders – modern fiction is thus yet another kind of body art in which Byatt, as the descendant of this tradition, participates.

Embodied art

The outlines of an implicit theory of what makes good – that is to say, living, breathing, *meaningful* – art thus emerge from a careful reading of Byatt's fiction. Its first principle is that such art must deal with the materiality of the world, with the physicality of existence. This move does not exclude abstract art, as Byatt demonstrates in 'A Lamia in the Cévennes', in which her artist-protagonist Bernard Lycett-Kean's abstractions are inspired by 'that rich blue, that cobalt, deep-washed blue of the South',[40] the 'green-tinged, duck-egg-tinged blues of the shifting water'[41] of his swimming pool, the 'velvety-black ... with longs bars of crimson and peacock-eyed spots, gold, green, blue, mixed with silver moonshapes'[42] of Melanie, the half-serpent, half-woman he encounters, or the 'orange-brown' and 'rich, gleaming intense purple' of a butterfly at the story's close.[43] Bernard may paint abstractions, but they are rooted in his empirical observations of the physical world around him. The second principle is that the best art draws its imaginative power from myths and stories, and it is in this respect that Byatt is particularly attracted to images and narratives drawn from humanity's religious heritage. The proof that Daisy, unlike Peggi Nollett, is a genuinely good artist comes from the fact that she really seems to grasp Beuys's project of producing '[r]eliquaries of no religion', an artistic mindset that is realized in her sculpture of Kali (p. 77). In contrast to Damian, who misrecognizes the 'museum artefacts' as truly sacred 'relics', Martha understands that Daisy is using the power of the religious imagery of the Hindu goddess without any acknowledgment of a supernatural dimension that extends beyond the physicality of her artistic materials (p. 77).

Byatt's admiration for religious imagery may seem a little strange since she is an avowed atheist, but this recycling of the sacred for artistic purposes has a long history in her work. In 2000, for instance, Byatt was invited by Philip Terry to contribute to *Ovid Metamorphosed*, a book reflecting on the continuing influence of the Roman poet Ovid. Byatt's piece is titled 'Arachne', after one of the mythological characters from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and sheds light, in particular, on the origins of her story 'Racine and the Tablecloth'. In its opening she reflects on what part the divine world has had to play in the artistic imagination, pointing in particular to how precursors like Henrik

[40] Byatt, *Elementals*, p. 86.
[41] Ibid., p. 86.
[42] Ibid., p. 95.
[43] Ibid., p. 110.

Ibsen, Ezra Pound, and Roberto Calasso saw the legacy of the old gods preserved in 'art galleries' and in 'the language'.[44] Byatt reveals that she had a similar experience in her childhood:

> When I was a small child, I was given books of Greek myths to read, sitting at the back of the class, after I had finished my set work, too fast. In those days, there was no question of belief. There were stories, and I used accounts of gods and goddesses to diminish the importance of the Bible stories, which I was expected to believe, and recognised as the same sort of stories as the Greek, and the Norse, myths, only less attractive, less powerful, less real. They were all stories. Larger and more exciting than life . . . but stories.[45]

Byatt uses this memory as the basis not only for the character of Emily Bray in 'Racine and the Tablecloth', but repeats a variant of it in *Ragnarok* (2011), in which the protagonist secretly reads Nordic myths and *The Pilgrim's Progress* under the bedcovers. What Byatt admires about these stories is not their religious dimension, but their imaginative and affective powers.

It should be no surprise, then, that 'Body Art' ultimately converges with Beuys's notion of art: an embodied, material process that, while borrowing from the creative aspects of religion, is nonetheless deeply anti-religious, creating 'reliquaries of no religion' (p. 77). That is why Byatt makes references in the story to the sacred, only to withdraw or subvert them a moment later – consider, for instance, St. Catherine's Gallery, the venue where Daisy exhibits her Kali sculpture, which is 'a cavernous decommissioned red-brick Victorian church' (p. 87). The same mindset is at work in Byatt's playful use of the Christmas theme. Daisy's pregnancy is no virgin birth, but in the context of her recent medical history, it certainly is, in the words of Damian, 'a minor miracle' (p. 94). The story's final scene is a sardonic re-enactment of the Christian motif of the holy family, a painting-made-flesh, but one in which the elements that make up the traditional image, just like the earlier Christmas babies, have been playfully modified – there are now *two* mothers (Martha is transformed in the course of the story into 'a kind of proxy mother' [p. 97]), and the central figure of the baby is not a boy but a little girl, Kate. Furthermore, while Martha is 'not herself moved to adoration', she nonetheless decides, as the story's voice of reason, to stay and help to raise the child (p. 107). The story thus closes with the characters frozen in an apparent homage to this familiar religious scene of worshipful gazing: 'All three continued to stare at the baby' (p. 107).

[44] A. S. Byatt, 'Arachne' in *Ovid Metamorphosed*, ed. by Philip Terry (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000), 131–57 (p. 131).

[45] Ibid.

What these three characters, together with the reader, observe in the figure of Kate is a collage of the various strands that make up this new vision of art that Byatt, like Daisy or Mrs. Brown, has constructed out of bits and pieces borrowed from the past. From the Renaissance humanists she takes the notion of embodiment, a transition from the divine Christ to the all-too-human one that haunts the characters in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, an experience that is replicated in 'Body Art' when Damian undergoes his own loss of faith before the statue of Christ on the cross. From the Dutch *vanitas* tradition she borrows the juxtaposition between physical beauty and the ugliness of death as they are related, through van Neck's anatomical painting and Ruych's specimens, to the materiality of the human body. From the modern novelistic tradition she takes the idea that the external 'cabinet of wonders' (the museum, the archive) has, in the Lockean notion that we are the sum of our experiences, created an internal 'cabinet of wonders' that is housed by our physical bodies. Finally, from Joseph Beuys, she takes not only the notion of 'body art' that informs Daisy's work but also, as Martha Sharpin explains, the idea that such art can borrow from the imaginative power of myth and religion while at the same time eschewing its sacred or supernatural aspects. The birth of little Kate represents the confluence of these tendencies, and what allows them to come together is a turning-away from the abstract illusions of the spiritual in favour of a materiality grounded in the physical world. The effect of this move is to collapse the distance between life and art, between words and things, so that human life itself can be seen as a work of art. Byatt's body art is thus predicated on a convergence between the conceptual and the physical that challenges modernity's problematic separation of these two spheres, giving birth to a new and secular form of embodied art.